



“This day some kind of mettle
was found in the tail of race that
looks like gaold.”

When Henry Bigler wrote in his diary, dated January 24, 1848,
he probably had no idea how important his scrawled words would become.
Those 17 words would establish the actual date of one of the most
important historical events in the development of the West, an event in which
he and his fellow Mormon Battalion members played a key role.

by Kellene Ricks Adams

The Mormon Battalion

Momentous MONDAY

‘The Set In and GOLD Was On the Brain’

Prior to the discovery of gold, Mormon Battalion members had already earned their place in history. From the time they were mustered together in June 1846 until the expiration of their enlistment a year later, the group made its mark. History records that the Battalion:

- blazed the wagon route that became the southern route to California;
- demonstrated the importance of the San Pedro and Santa Cruz rivers as transportation corridors, which led to the Gadsden Purchase;
- took part in the conquest of California to claim it as part of the United States;
- opened the highway through the Sierra Nevada that is now called the Mormon-Carson Pass Emigrant Trail, which became the main entrance to California for approximately 200,000 gold-seeking immigrants during 1849-56;
- drove the first wagons over the Old Spanish Trail and the Salt Lake Cutoff of the California Trail.

Most of these milestones were accomplished quietly, often not even recognized until time had proven their value. The discovery of gold, however, was a different story.

That Mormon men were even involved in the discovery is a story in itself. Once the Mormon Battalion had been disbanded near what is now San Diego, most of its members made their way north up the California coast before heading east for Great Salt Lake City to join their pioneer families there. En route, they spent a few days at Fort Sutter, a small-but-growing community founded by John Sutter, where some opted to stay and work for the winter.

Most of the men, however, continued on toward Utah—until they met Sam Brannan at Donner Lake.

Brannan was the leader of a group of pioneers who had sailed from the East Coast to the West Coast on the ship Brooklyn. He had already traveled to the Salt Lake Valley, where he met with Brigham Young in hopes of convincing the pioneer leader and his party to continue on to the West Coast. Brigham Young refused, reiterating his belief that they had already found their “Zion.”

Deeply disappointed, Brannan returned West, carrying with him a message from President Young to the Battalion men. The message indicated that food was scarce in the valley and suggested that unless they had family waiting for them, they should “return to California and go to work and fit themselves out with plenty of clothing, stock, provisions, etc.,” then join the new community the following year.

So Bigler joined a group of others who retraced their steps back to Fort Sutter, looking for work. It wasn’t hard to find. John Sutter had a dream of commercial success in the California Territory, and during this post-war period, his dream was flourishing. At the time, Sutter’s payroll included hundreds. He

employed Native Americans who wove blankets and made hats. People came from miles around to buy the leather, shoes, saddles, hats, spurs and bridles his workmen produced. In addition, Sutter had several hundred farm and ranch hands planting and harvesting his fields. By the end of 1847, Sutter estimated his livestock holdings included 12,000 head of cattle, 2,000 horses and mules, between 10,000 and 15,000 sheep, and 1,000 hogs. He was also building a gristmill that a friend boasted would “grind what the whole Sacramento Valley will be able to produce in wheat.”

More than 70 Mormon men joined this bustling, growing Fort Sutter community, working “as carpenters and laborers; they dug ditches, made shoes, tanned hides, built granaries and a grist mill at Natamo.”

In order to complete the gristmill, Sutter determined he needed a sawmill as well, and one of his employees, James Marshall, talked him into a site about 50 miles from the fort on the South fork of the American River. Work on the sawmill began in September 1847, and 17 of the 25 on-site workers were Mormon Battalion veterans.

On the momentous Monday that marked the discovery of gold, most of the mill construction was completed. One of the few jobs left was deepening the tailrace that carried the water back to the river after it had turned the wheel. Usually Marshall left the sluice gate open at night so the water flow would naturally erode some gravel and sand, thereby making the job easier. Every morning after shutting the water off, Marshall walked the ditch to check things out.

That’s what he was doing on January 24, when he noticed small flakes of shining yellow metal at the bottom of the race. He got a tin pan and scooped a few handfuls of dirt from the stream, rinsing away the lighter material with swishing motions under the water. Although Marshall was excited at what he had found, he was not wholly convinced that he’d found gold. And when he showed his treasure to the small group of men at the mill, including some former Battalion members, they reportedly laughed at him; none of them had ever seen gold in its native state.

By the next morning, however, their doubts had disappeared. And when Marshall showed up with a hatful of gold fragments, they all came up with different methods to test the metal. The men pounded several grains of the metal; instead of crumbling under the blows, the metal flattened to the thinness of paper. They burned particles, which remained unchanged. And finally, they threw some of the gold into a pot of lye, but the strong chemical had no effect.

Curious now, the men followed Marshall to the tailrace. “In looking close,” wrote Bigler, “we could see particles here and there on the base rock and in seams and crevices. Conjectures were it must be rich, and from that time the fever set in and gold was on the brain.”

Truthfully, however, gold was only on Bigler’s brain. Initially, the discovery of gold met with a surprisingly lukewarm response. A few people who heard of the discovery dismissed it as a small find; other gold mines had been discovered in California, but few yielded enough of the precious metal to make the effort of mining worthwhile.

Once again, it was Mormon Battalion members who played a key role in spreading the news. “It was mainly due to the Mormon workers at the mill,” writes Oscar Lewis, “and in particular to diary-writer Henry Bigler, that the true significance of the discovery eventually came to be recognized.”

Several of the Mormons told Battalion comrades; Bigler himself wrote to a couple of friends who were working at Sutter’s gristmill. Before long, a few curious Battalion members arrived to see for themselves. Sidney Willes, Wilford Hudson, and Levi Fifield asked Marshall for permission to prospect, and a few days later found gold particles on an island in the American River halfway between the sawmill and the fort. That strike became known as Mormon Island and turned out to be the second major gold strike, following the find at Sutter’s Mill.

The breadth of the Sutter’s Mill gold strike was probably first understood by Bigler, who recorded in his diary that “I was the only one in the crowd who had gold badly on the brain.” Bigler slipped away most weekends, using his jackknife to hack away at possible gold sites. After a month of these weekend trips, however, his fellow workers cornered him, demanding to know what he was doing; he showed them his small stash of gold dust. After that, others in the group began personal prospecting, and the gold movement began to gain momentum.

Battalion members spread the word about the gold discovery in other ways, as well. Sam Brannan, who owned the California Star, the first newspaper in the state, hired six Battalion men and four non-Mormons to carry a special edition of the paper back east. Most of the paper’s content was aimed at convincing colonists to move to California, extolling the virtues of the state. The mention of gold was almost an afterthought, taking up only two small paragraphs on an inside page without so much as a headline. The men, dubbed The California Star Express riders, headed out on April 1, 1848, with newspapers in hand, marking another historical milestone—giving the world its first written record of the California gold discovery and carrying the first mail to go overland, from West to East, under private contract.

On their eastward journey, the group stopped in Salt Lake Valley, reuniting with family and friends. While there, they met with Brigham Young. “I showed him the gold and asked if he would go on to California,” remembered Nathan Hawk, one of the riders. Brigham replied: “No! I hope they will never strike



California's Golden Jubilee. Courtesy LDS Archives.

gold in the country where we [are] located, for I do not want my people to go digging for their God.”

It was late summer, months after the actual discovery, that official news of the gold find was first heard in the East. Newspaper reporters who received copies of the California Star were quick to recognize the significance of the find.

The frenzy was fueled even further when President James E. Polk confirmed the discovery in a December 5 message to Congress. “The accounts of the abundance of gold are of such an extraordinary character as would scarcely command belief were they not corroborated by the authentic reports of officers in the public service,” the president wrote.

Tens of thousands of gold-seekers, dubbed Forty-Niners in our history books, headed into California, completely changing the future of the union’s new state. Although few actually found enough gold to make their fortunes, most would stay, establishing California as one of the most populated areas of the country.

For their part, many of the Mormon Battalion members headed back to Utah, just as President Young had instructed. While the allure of gold was powerful, apparently they were drawn by something much more powerful. “We saw them washing out the gold with pans,” recalled one Battalion member, “but we did not stop there long. We were anxious to come to Salt Lake.”

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